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Slovakia-Belarus Task Force presents

The Fading Pillars of Power in Belarus: 100 days of Milinkevich

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I. Executive Summary:

On January 9, 2006 100 days left from the elections of Alexander Milinkevich¹ as single candidate of the democratic forces. The announcement of the presidential elections for March 19, 2006 took the Belarusian democratic organizations by surprise. The enhancement of the power structures before the elections triggered authorities' pressure on opposition and civil society organizations alike. By announcing an earlier than expected schedule Lukashenka is intent on showing, Western political circles, the international community and also Belarusians, his capacity to stay in power after two presidential terms. By calling early elections Lukashenka not only deprives the opposition of the most important resource to mount a successful election campaign - time - but also limits the ability to attract the significant financial, material and human resources required to prepare a successful election campaign.

The "single candidate" Milinkevich, elected by the Congress of Democratic Forces on October 2, 2005, is facing the five pillars of power. Other oppositional candidates – especially Alexander Kazulin – may yet divide the democratic vote and deflect voter's attention. This analysis argues that for an "elegant victory" of Lukashenka four candidates might be needed in 2006. Nevertheless, in the 100 days since his election Milinkevich has proved his leadership capacity and has been the main uniting factor for the democratic organisations. To consider him a real candidate, even with his improving ratings², he needs to break the 22-25% threshold that every "normal" opposition candidate in Belarus needs to gain in the ballot.

Through another "elegant victory" Lukashenka is basically offering the West the opportunity to recognize his regime. This is partly what drives the official media efforts to promote the (allegedly) existing "positive" prospects for development of the Washington-Minsk relationship. However, it is highly likely that the United States and the European Union will refuse to recognize the presidential elections as "free and fair". This may not influence Lukashenka's post-elections plans, if Belarus is able to keep the absence of real political relationship with the West, but growing economic and trading co-operation.³ The geopolitical (political and military) significance of the Lukashenka regime as Russia's closest ally has been increasing as Ukraine has moved closer to NATO and the EU. The perspective of the Ukraine joined with NATO has forced Russia to solve all acute problems it had with the Lukashenka regime.

Lukashenka can be certain that Moscow will, once again, recognize Belarus's presidential elections scheduled for March 2006 as "free and fair" and declare Belarus's situation an "internal matter". This support reduces the risk of total international isolation of the current Belarusian regime. Kremlin policy appears to be a sufficient factor to provide the necessary foreign policy pre-conditions for keeping Lukashenka in power. The post-elections development, however, could turn even Lukashenka against Russia should the Kremlin insist on a union state between Belarus and Russia.

¹ Alexander Milinkevich was born in 1947 in a teachers' family. Candidate of physico-mathematical sciences, senior lecturer. From 1990 till 1996 – deputy chairman of Grodno Executive Committee, working in the field of culture, education, medicine, sports, youth and international relations. From 1996 – chairman of "Ratusha" public association (Grodno), liquidated by court in 2003. In 2001 Milinkevich directed the electoral headquarter of a presidential candidate Semen Domash. From 1998 - chairman of the Belarusian Association of Resource Centres. Director of a number of programs of the Regional Development Assistance Fund. Married, has two sons. He was elected as "single candidate" in the Congress of Democratic Forces on October 2, 2005.

² According to the representative sample conducted by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic Studies, Milinkevich's rating in ballot test with Lukashenko reached 18,1% in December 2005.

³ More see Dependence of Belarus economy on trading with Western European countries and USA, Policy Paper, Pontis Foundation's Institute for Civic Diplomacy, September 2005

II. Election Date

On December 16, 2005, the Lower Chamber of Parliament scheduled Belarus presidential elections for March 19, 2006. In fact the rubber-stamp parliament merely promulgated the decision taken by Alexander Lukashenka. Since the previous (the second in the history of post-Soviet Belarus) presidential elections were held on September 9, 2001, analysts had expected the CEC to announce, sometime in July 2006, presidential elections for this autumn.. The re-scheduling does not necessarily mean that Lukashenka and his circle doubt their capability to achieve the desired election results. However it is necessary to take into account the threat to the regime by the growing approval rating of the single democratic candidate Milinkevich.

In September 2005 Lukashenka confidently declared that in the first round of the upcoming presidential elections at least 80% of voters would support his candidacy. On December 23, the Socio-Political Research Institute, controlled by the Presidential Administration, published the data from their sociological survey. They stated that if presidential elections were held in December 2005 Lukashenka's candidacy would be supported by 75% of Belarusian voters in the first round. According to the results of the latest public opinion questionnaires, carried out by IISEPS in September 2005, 47,3% of voters expressed their willingness to support Lukashenka in the upcoming presidential elections. This already signals the elections results. No wonder that the most important question throughout Belarus is "why do we need elections at all?" This is the main reason for the currently skeptical atmosphere, as the democratic opposition has been unable to make any breakthroughs due to a lack of viable or visible political alternatives in the social or economic spheres.

By bringing the election forward Lukashenka intends to show his capability to stay in power after two presidential terms without resorting to physical violence or, at least, to considerable, large-scale usage of physical violence. This will supposedly demonstrate the stability of his power and the support of a significant part of the electorate.

Nevertheless, Lukashenka is purposely creating a situation of minimum time for Milinkevich to prepare for the upcoming election. The current situation within the opposition stipulates that the declaration of the "single candidate" only has a nominal status. To obtain the real status of "single candidate" requires, besides other compulsory conditions, a certain period of time. It takes time not only to consolidate and organise the opposition, but also to persuade the electorate to vote for a "single democratic candidate", and to take to the streets in event of falsification of the election results. By holding the presidential election in March 2006 Lukashenka not only deprives the opposition of time (the most important resource of any election campaign), but also the lessens the possibility of attracting more significant financial and material resources for running the election campaign.

The possibility of the opposition to draw support from external sources is also determined by the geopolitical situation of the country. Lukashenka clearly understands that the priority of the US and EU foreign policy in the near future is the promotion of the integration of Ukraine into the European economic and political sphere. The results of the parliamentary elections in March 2006 will, in fact, determine the direction of political development in the Ukraine. Scheduling presidential elections for March Lukashenka can be sure that the West will not be able (or willing) to make the resources available.

Lukashenka is basically offering an opportunity to the West to recognize his regime and the Belarus presidential election. This is the reason that the official media keeps promoting the allegedly existing “positive” prospects of development of the Washington-Minsk relationship. Officially Minsk is doing this on its own: in order to “push” the U.S. to make one-sided steps toward Belarus, Lukashenka is demonstrating his power within the country, and emphasizing that any pressure on the regime has limited prospects for change, and therefore there is no alternative toward the regime. His main goal for the regime of 2006 is, therefore, the recognition of his regime by the U.S. and the EU: or at least to initiate discussions with a number of EU member states about recognition of the regime based on the following argument. “Any pressure on Belarus is futile and a waste of time”. If there is no change in the West, Lukashenka will maintain the confrontation with the West, and keep up the pressure on political parties and civil society.

Still, the early election date shortens the term of Lukashenka’s “regular” presidency by almost half a year. It is better to note that Lukashenka considers this election, along with his third term, as the next stage of the “life” of the presidency. One has to consider the ambition and (personal) mission of Lukashenka as being the only savior of Belarusian interests and to consider his state of mind as a serious policy-making factor. This (rather psychological) argument might become more apparent in post-election developments of Belarus, where Lukashenka would take a course against Russia if it insisted on an union state which required a loss of independence for Belarus.

III. The Five Pillars of Power:

The voter’s attitude and the further development of Belarus will depend on processes both within the administration and the opposition. This analysis deals with both, and also mentions post-2004 developments. Firstly, the analysis deals with Lukashenka’s “five pillars of power”.

1) Lukashenka’s “siloviki”

Within Lukashenka’s circle (former KGB counter-intelligence agent) Ural Latypov and (former KGB general) Stanislav Knyazev occupy the most important posts. However, the influence of “analysts” and/or “diplomats” (the so-called Latypov-group) was significantly reduced due to the differing attitudes towards dealing with the opposition. The authorities used not only force, but also intrigue, “pushing” the opposition into making mistakes, trying to divide opposition activists using highly developed secret service “games” and agents provocateurs. “Counter-intelligence agents” and “*siloviki*” had been striving for influence over Lukashenka and Viktor Sheiman⁴, was reduced to the use of force toward opponents up until the 2004 referendum. The struggle, however, ended in victory for Sheiman’s group. On November 29, 2004 Viktor Sheiman was appointed, by Lukashenka, as the Head of the Presidential Administration. Having previously held the posts of Head of the Security Council and Public Prosecutor, Lukashenka’s old friend, Sheiman has controlled administrative and judicial bodies (CSC, Office of Public Prosecutor) and law enforcement structures (KGB, MIA). He has maintained pressure on state-owned enterprises, ensuring the loyalty of state officials. Last week Sheiman was relieved from the post of the Head of Presidential Administration and was appointed to be the head of Lukashenka’s Pre-election Headquarters.⁵ This move only reinforces the clear desire for an “elegant victory”,

⁴ About “siloviki” please see Belarus before Voting: Politics and Society, Pontis Foundation’s Institute for Civic Diplomacy, 2004,

http://www.pontisfoundation.sk/tmp/asset_cache/link/0000012397/Belarus%20Before%20Voting_CPE.pdf

⁵ Gennady Nevyglas, who earlier served as the State Secretary of the Belarusian Security Council, heads the Administration. See *RIA Novosti*; *January 4, 2005*; <http://www.rian.ru/politics/cis/20060104/42851660.html>

but also signaled that the regime's preparations for the elections are serious. Nevertheless, during 2005 Sheiman's group strengthened its representation in the leading posts in law enforcement and the administration. Viktor Sheiman, however, can only ever be the second person in the state - after Lukashenka. Like those promoted by Sheiman to administrative posts and involved in the "rougher" activities of the regime, Viktor Sheiman himself can only feel secure while Lukashenka remains in power. It should be noted that Lukashenka depends on Sheiman and his group as well, and accordingly is forced to act in their interests.

It is, therefore, no small wonder that this so-called "Shklov-Mogilev clan" has strong representation throughout the Presidential Administration, Parliament and the Belarusian government. The clan members, appointed to their positions by Lukashenka personally, are his old acquaintances and occupy leading posts in the administration of the regions, cities and towns of Belarus. State officials' loyalty toward Lukashenka's regime is largely maintained through financial means (higher salaries, possibilities of dividends from state-owned commercial structures), and also through the obvious fear connected to the stability of the regime. A continuous process of "vertical executive" enforcement and administration structures, as well as courts, formerly directed by Sheiman or his proxies, serves as a clear and obvious demonstration of control to state officials. In the event of any state official joining the opposition they will be subject to legal prosecution or will face a similar destiny to that of Lukashenka's previous opponents. By 2006 Lukashenka will be able to use administrative resource at an almost total level. The goal is obvious. To control the outcome of the presidential election and to control the situation after the declaration of the election results.

2) Isolating the opposition

In 2005 the authorities maintained the policy of isolating the opposition from all possible public resources, or support from the economic elite (leaders of state enterprises), trade unions and small entrepreneurs. This was ensured through a new wave of "cleansing" after the declaration of the referendum results⁶. Mainly directors of large state industrial enterprises appeared to be subject to legal prosecution, and were accused of corruption⁷. In a number of cases their political motivation was quite obvious, but *corpus delicti* in activities of the economic elite is always dubious. Even contact with the democratic opposition could lead to directors of state enterprises being accused of "economic crime" and jailed soon after. As result, in 2006 the probability of any high level economic official joining the opposition equated to zero regardless of his thoughts about political and economic development of the country.

A significant part of the independent trade unions was destroyed and put under the authorities' control during 2002-2003. Independent trade unions in large Belarusian enterprises managed to survive only in the remote regions, for example in Soligorsk or Grodno. Nowadays the efforts of the official Federation of Belarusian Trade Unions and the local structures of the "vertical executive" are to replace the leadership of the last independent trade unions with "apparatchiks" completely loyal to the current authorities.

⁶ During Lukashenka's presidency this became a tradition in Belarus. Thus, after his victory in the presidential elections in September, 2001, a wave of arrests of representatives of the directorate body followed the instituting of criminal proceedings against the general director of Minsk Tractor Plant Mikhail Leonov and the general director of Minsk Plant of Refrigerators Leonid Kalugin

⁷ In November-December of 2004 the directors of one of the most profitable large Belarusian enterprises – oil refinery "Naftan" (Novopolotsk) - together with the general director Konstantin Chesnovitsky, were arrested. In January 2005 the general director of Minsk Bearing Plant Valery Penza was arrested. In April, 2005 the directors of another large Minsk enterprise - Minsk Wheel Tractors Plant, together with the general director Gennady Sinegovsky, were arrested

During March 2005, protesting against the authorities' decision to increase taxes, about 80.000 Belarusian entrepreneurs took part in a strike. Lukashenka took advantage of the conflict, and through a well-managed PR campaign re-presented it as a conflict between entrepreneurs and the Ministry of Taxation, where he played the role of the defender of entrepreneurs' interests. The presidential decree from April 22, 2005 therefore established fixed rents and rates for small traders, which reduced payment fees in markets. Thus by 2006 he had effectively removed the possibility that public organizations representing entrepreneurs' interests will join the opposition. That a significant number of entrepreneurs would take part in opposition activities is now effectively excluded.

3) Repression

The current economic growth of Belarus has further reduced the number of workers taking part in opposition activities. It is interesting to note that as protest actions became more "intelligent" (in terms of social structure) the more aggressive became the members of the law enforcement agencies. In 2005 the authorities did everything possible to make physical violence unnecessary while controlling the street protests. On the other hand psychological violence was widely used against Belarusian democratic structures. The authorities made sure that everyone realized that in the case of any participation in protest action, or other forms of "undesirable" activity, those involved would be likely face the most robust reaction.

Other measures in preparation for street protests were through legal means⁸: In January 2005, the Parliament amended the bill "Regarding Internal Troops of the MIA of the Republic of Belarus", where a paragraph about "criminal order" was cancelled.⁹ With this change the President obtained the right to determine cases of application by internal troops for the use of special military facilities¹⁰, military equipment and weapons against a peaceful population. On November 25, 2005 in its first reading¹¹. The Parliament accepted the amendments to the Criminal and Criminal Legal Codes thereby increasing the range of responses available to control the "activities directed against people and public security".¹²

According to the new norms the authorities now have the possibility to institute criminal proceedings against any representative of liquidated¹³ or registered NGOs. An obscure interpretation of "discredit of the state", "appeals to foreign states..." allows for the initiation of criminal proceedings against any journalist from the independent mass media¹⁴, or against any independent analyst (political scientist, economists, etc.). The legal principle of the Lukashenka

⁸ See more in Legal memorandum: The new anti-revolution legislation of Belarus, Pontis Foundation's Institute for Civic Diplomacy, December 2005, http://www.pontisfoundation.sk/tmp/asset_cache/link/0000014579/Legal%20Memo%20on%20Anti%20Revolution%20Legislation%20of%20Belarus.pdf

⁹ The previous amendment envisaged that "If a militiaman receives unlawful instructions or orders from authorities or state officials, he must observe the law", e.g. according to the previous amendment servicemen of internal troops, the MIA staff members could refuse to shoot or run military technical devices over peaceful population

¹⁰ Tear-gas, for example

¹¹ The bill marked "urgent" by the President, was submitted to consideration of the Parliament on 23 of November. Alongside the fact that the amendments to the Law "About internal troops of the MIA" were approved by the Parliament, the approval of this bill is a clear evidence of Lukashenka's total control over Belarusian Parliament

¹² See more in Legal memorandum: The new anti-revolution legislation of Belarus, Pontis Foundation's Institute for Civic Diplomacy, December 2005

¹³ After presidential elections of 2001 all known by the author NGOs were urgently liquidated by court, - their representatives took part in election campaigns of candidates – opponents of Lukashenka, Human Rights defense activities, activities directed to mobilize democratic electorate, dissemination of information amongst Belarusian voters, election observation

¹⁴ Commenting the law, the Presidential Administration members outlined the possibility to institute criminal proceedings against foreign journalists currently staying in Belarus, for "discrediting the state".

regime towards its opponent is simple: there will always be a paragraph in the criminal code which can be used to bring charges.

After the parliamentary elections and the referendum a number of opposition candidates, deputies of parliament¹⁵ and opposition teams' members were persecuted by the authorities. By February 1, 2005, 6 out of the 40 BPF members running for parliamentary seats lost their jobs, 5 from the United Civic Party (UCP) and 3 from the Party of Communists of Belarus (PCB) were equally punished. In Belozersk and Polotsk candidates' proxies were fired from their jobs¹⁶. Three candidates were called to the Public Prosecutor's Office¹⁷ on trumped up charges.

The steps taken by the authorities in the post-referendum period outline Lukashenka's willingness to demonstrate a full range of repressive measures. After the presidential elections of 2006 these will undoubtedly be applied against opposition organizations' activists and citizens taking part in opposition activities. These measures can range from job dismissal to significant detention periods based on false criminal allegations. Criminal actions can be falsified and taken against the children and relatives of opposition activists, who consider these actions to be a warning from the authorities'.

4) Information vacuum

The authorities have considerably reduced the opportunities for the opposition to disseminate information. "Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta", "Belorussky rynek", "Narodnaya volya" newspapers were excluded from the state information/dissemination system. Nowadays the only independent newspaper that is still criticizing different aspects of Lukashenka's policy (mainly within the fields of culture and education), is "Nasha niva". The newspaper only has a small circulation of about 5.000 copies. On December 19, 2005, Andrey Dynko, the editor-in-chief of "Nasha niva" emphasized that there is a high probability of exclusion of the newspaper from the state distribution system.

Similarly the authorities do everything possible to stop the distribution of independent newspapers by the retail trade network.. Owners of kiosks agreeing to sell independently printed media received official warnings¹⁸. Newspapers expressing an objective evaluation of Belarusian events¹⁹ are only available in the big cities of Belarus from independent street-sellers.

5) Economic factors

The main factor that is currently allowing Lukashenka to control the country is the improvement in the socio-economic situation in Belarus through the growth in GDP. High oil prices on the world market, along with cheap energy purchases from Russia, are the most important reason behind the economic development of Belarus. Welfare growth of the population is signaled by indirect indices - real estate prices are on the rise along with a dynamic consumer demand. In the most successful regions of Belarus in terms of economic development - Minsk and Pinsk - the average price per square meter had reached the thousands USD by 2005. The automobile trade is also noticing increasing volumes and revenues.

¹⁵ The authorities resorted to a total falsification of the parliamentary elections' results. None of opposition representatives was elected to the parliament

¹⁶ Proxies of Yuras Gubarevich and Lera Som

¹⁷ Marina Bogdanovich (director of Minsk city branch of UCP), Alexander Tsygankov and Lyudmila Krasnoselskaya.

¹⁸ The part of those responsible for stopping the dissemination of independent newspapers was played by deputy heads of regional, municipal executive committees ("executive vertical" structures). In case of non-implementation of instructions entrepreneurs were guaranteed lots of "trouble" from taxation bodies, fire inspection...

¹⁹ "Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta", "Belorussky rynek", "Narodnaya volya", "Solidarnost".

For the first nine months of 2005 48,2% of Belarus commodities were imported by Russia, which comprised 36% of total Belarusian export. However in 2005 Belarus significantly increased its export volumes to EU countries. So far trade with the EU comprises 43,4% of the total export volume. The socio-economic situation in Belarus will be expected to continue into 2006. The stability of high oil (and oil products) prices in the world market continues to ensure growth of Belarusian exports to Russia and the EU countries. Further improvement of the socio-economic situation in the country is the main pre-condition for political stability in 2006.

Nevertheless Lukashenka understands that only economic independence from Russia can keep him in power. The newly adopted 2006-2010 social and economic advance of Belarus puts trade and economic cooperation with new members of the European Union at the center of attention.²⁰ Moreover, ignoring the general attitude of Europe towards Belarus, the program calls for establishing "a common European economic area" and for the introduction, in the longer term, of visa-free transit between Belarus and the EU.

IV. The Opposition

The starting conditions for Milinkevich, the "single candidate" are worse now than compared to 2001. In 2000-2001 the hope for change in Belarus was backed up by a much stronger desire for reform, not only by opposition activists and the democratic electorate, but also by a significant number of "undecided" voters. In March 2001, half a year before the presidential elections, the uncertainty of Lukashenka's position was revealed when comparing the ratings of that time for both the presidential candidates²¹. However, the non-transparent "election" of the "single candidate" and the campaigning capabilities of the ex-chairman of the Federation of Belarusian Trade Unions, Vladimir Goncharik demobilized most of the democratic activists. With the Congress of Democratic Forces the opposition, for the first time, had a successful mass-action and the single candidate Milinkevich has already proved his capability to be a good candidate for the Belarusian conditions. He is actively pursuing a door-to-door campaign, and is able to act as a bridge between the different political factions that make up the various democratic groupings. He has emphasised this by naming Sergey Kaliakin as head of the Election Headquarters (Shtab) and Anatolij Lebedko as head of the National Committee, and also (considering Belarusian conditions) by his successful campaign efforts.

The road towards the Congress has been difficult. The opposition in the post-2004 period went through a complete breakdown of all the organized coalitions. After the 2004 referendum there were three opposition coalitions including political parties and NGOs within the opposition structure. These included the National Coalition 5+²², European Coalition (EC)²³, Council of Civil Initiatives "Svobodnaya Belarus"²⁴ (SB, "Free Belarus"). The Belarusian Socio-

²⁰ Kommersant, Belarus Advocates Visa-Free Procedures with EU, January 6, 2006

²¹ According to the IISEPS data, in March, 2001, 39,8% of voters expressed their willingness to vote for Lukashenka, while his opponent, former prime-minister Mikhail Chigir gained 17,9% of votes. The current authorities "removed" Chigir from the list of participants of presidential race and instituted a criminal proceeding.

²² There are 5 members of "5+": PBPF (Chairman – Vintsuk Viachorka), UCP (Anatoly Lebedko), PCB (Sergey Kalyakin), Party of Greens (Oleg Gromyko), liquidated Belarussian Party of Labor (Alexander Bukhvostov). There are lots of NGOs taking part in coalition activities ("Fellowship of Belarussian language"), including registered and unregistered: "Vesna" Human Rights Defense Centre, "Association of Belarussian Students", etc.

²³ There are 4 members of "European Coalition": regional structures of the former Belarussian Socio-Democratic Party (Narodnaya Gramada), supporting Statkevich, Party of Women of Belarus "Nadzeya" ("Hope", chairman – Nataliya Matusевич), unregistered Party of Freedom and Progress (chairman – Vladimir Novosyad); unregistered NGO "Molodoi Front" (leader – Pavel Severinets)

²⁴ "European Coalition" and Council of Civil Initiatives "Svobodnaya Belarus" were founded in February, 2005 after the break up of European Coalition "Svobodnaya Belarus" (EC (SB)). There are 2 members of "Svobodnaya

Democratic Party (BSDP)²⁵, Alexander Voitovich, former chairman of the Upper Chamber of Belarusian Parliament²⁶, and General Valery Frolov, former deputy of the House of Representatives. Many of these had pretensions to the opposition leader's position, but without disposing of their own organisation's structure, they have been trying to attract activists of the coalition.

The members of the National Coalition "5+" comprise about 75% of the total number of opposition parties and NGOs²⁷. Despite its successful end, the pre-Congress primaries organized a selection of delegates of the Congress showed that ideological differences still exist within the democratic organizations. The very first regional conference in Gomel (April 3) demonstrated that the appointment of a pro-Russian Lebedko, or a "soviet orthodox" Kalyakin with his "anti-market" policy as "single candidate" is absolutely unacceptable for the PBPF members. The willingness to resist the appointment of "national democrat" Milinkevich united the liberals (UCP) and communists (PCB) and made possible the realization of their protest action against the election of a "single candidate".

The atmosphere at the majority of the regional conferences was usually tense. Conferences were held in 123 regions, and completely failed in 20 of those and even for those who wish to take a more positive view it still appears that the 5+ Coalition's main uniting force and priority is merely an anti-Lukashenka policy. Simply put then, the best that can be said is, that it is a coalition "against". In terms of taking important decisions, or at least figuring out "whom and what" they should support, there still remains a serious conflict of interest between the coalition members reflected in the serious differences that remain for many issues.

However, following these developments Alexander Milinkevich was duly elected as the "single opposition candidate" at the Congress of Democratic Forces on October 2, 2005. Prior to the Congress only a very few people had actually believed that the opposition would be able to successfully organize a national event, and even if any of the candidates would be able fulfill the position of "single candidate". Since the representatives of the political parties and NGOs, part of the 5+ structure, took part in the Congress, Milinkevich could only obtain the full status as the "single candidate", if actively supported by other opposition organizations. The Congress of October 2, 2005 appeared to be the last round of an open power-struggle between the members of "5+" for the "single candidate" status. Once the regional conferences had voted for Milinkevich²⁸, UCP maximized efforts to persuade deputies to vote for their candidate - the chairman of UCP Anatoly Lebedko who stood second in the regional conferences.

Belarus' Council of Civil Initiatives: NGO "Charter-97" (leaders – Andrei Sannikov and Dmitry Bondarenko) and unregistered NGO "Zubr".

²⁵ This party emerged in April 10, 2005 as a result of convergence of Belarussian Socio-democratic Party (Narodnaya Gramada) (Chairman – Anatoly Levkovich) and Belarussian Socio-Democratic Hramada (chairman – Stanislav Shushkevich). At the uniting congress former rector of the Belarussian State University Alexander Kozulin was appointed as the Chairman of BSDP (H)

²⁶ Council of the Republic

²⁷ This is our estimation. The total number of opposition organization activists was not counted because the number of those taking part in organizations activities does not coincide with their number according to the list. The dynamics of increase of organization members' number also depends on short term factors

²⁸ At a number of regional conferences candidate from PBPF and Party of Greens A. Milinkevich received support not only from these parties, but also from a significant number of NGOs' representatives due to the following factors:

1. Many Belarusian NGOs are ideological allies of PBPF. UCP is partially supported by the "third sector", mainly amongst NGOs of Gomel and Mogilev regions, sharing borders with Russia. UCP is not supported by NGOs.
 2. Milinkevich himself is a representative of the "third sector".
- It's important that even at Gomel regional conference (UCP is widely supported by NGOs of Gomel region) Milinkevich gained the majority of votes.

After Milinkevich's victory in the Congress many UCP members recommended that they should leave the "5+ Coalition". At the UCP Congress held on October 5, 2005 there was a call for individual participation in the elections, having Lebedko as a candidate. Voitovich's candidacy and his proposal to act within the terms of his election campaign was an alternative to this option. However, led by Lebedko, UCP party members recognized the results of the Congress and therefore the election of Milinkevich as the "single candidate". In the post-Congress period the most important question was how the "defeated" party structures will participate in the presidential campaign. Despite the UCP Grodno regional branch's immediate announcement of non-participation after the Congress, other parties have engaged with the regional headquarters and initiative groups for the collection of signatures for Milinkevich.

The Communist Party of Belarus (PCB), which many call the "pensioners' party", is acting for the Milinkevich campaign, but mainly at the decision-making level. Following the Congress' hostile attitude towards "nationalists", the "BPF fascists" aligned with the "UCP lobbyists of Russian oligarchs' interests" were popular at PCB's regional structures. However, Kaliakin, the Communist Party chairman, as the head of election headquarters, and Milinkevich's regional visits along with his increasing rating have also been changing the dynamics of these relations.

Despite all this Milinkevich can expect to be able to depend on BPF structures and NGO networks in his campaign.²⁹ The combination of BPF and NGOs in 2001 was able to successfully run the election campaign of Semen Domash for president, and was merely missing in the final democratic candidate Goncharik's campaign. It is important to note that Milinkevich, still does not possess a serious election campaign program, supposedly prepared by the Lebedko-led National Committee. By the end of December 2005, the Belarusian regions had received only one leaflet prepared by Milinkevich's Election Shtab.

In direct contrast to his 2001 "predecessor" Goncharik, Milinkevich appeared to be the optimal candidate for 2006. One of the last democratic politicians used to occupying leading posts in the city/state administration, he is a person of unsullied reputation. Milinkevich is becoming a real threat to Lukashenka. It will need more than just his personal capabilities to mount a successful election campaign. It is also questionable whether the unity of the opposition, created by the prospects and necessity of staying together before the presidential elections, and the surprisingly easy acceptance of Milinkevich and his improving ratings will be remain strong enough after the election.

Milinkevich has to contend with the conservative, cautious and sceptical attitudes of Belarusian voters looking for promises of a better life. Any Belarusian evaluation of the quality of life is usually determined by the living standards obtained by Belarus' neighbors. Belarusians can see a disastrous situation in the Russian regions, hunger strikes as a form of protest against delays in payment of salaries, cuts in the supply of electricity and gas, contract killings, robberies, and the dubious privatization of state enterprises. So it appears that Russia has lower living standards and levels of social security when compared with Belarus. And that is not to mention the "lack of order" in Ukraine. Under the influence of this kind of information it is easy and natural for Belarusians to think that life is "not so bad" in their own country.

The democratic electorate is largely made up of young people with higher education who have become very demanding. A significant number of those willing to support democrats make big demands on the opposition according to their own interpretation of effective action, which "appears" to be indispensable for achieving certain results. The key indicator for Milinkevich is to achieve the regular 20-25% for the opposition candidate in polls before the presidential

²⁹ Party of Greens still remains a nominal political figure.

election. The December 2005 polls of IISEPS gives 18,1 for Milinkevich in the ballot test with Lukashenka (55%), which is solid, but not yet a critical number given the early date of the elections.³⁰ To consider Milinkevich as a real candidate, he will need to break through the 22-25% rating “threshold” that any “normal” opposition candidate in Belarus could count on.

- *More Democratic Candidates*

On December 27, 2005 the Central Election Commission registered all eight nomination groups³¹ to collect signatures for candidates seeking registration for the presidential election. The largest nomination groups are those of the incumbent President Lukashenka (6,212 people), Milinkevich (5,135), Belarusian Social Democratic Party head Alexander Kazulin (3,347), and Democratic Liberal Party head Sergey Gaidukevich (3,073), Zyanon Paznyak (2,405), Alyaksandr Voitovich (1,314), Valery Frolov (1,152), and Sergej Skrebets (130).

Most probably Frolov, Skrebets and Voitovich³² won't be registered as candidates, since it is unlikely that they will be able to collect the required number of signatures necessary for registration (more than 100.000). They have no active organization or structures behind them. Voters interested in social and economic issues, in the main, do not perceive General Frolov and Professor (physics and mathematics) Voitovich as competent in economic and social issues. Skrebets also has no possibility of gaining support from undecided voters since he tarnished his image by lobbying for the interests of big Russian private companies, i.e. buying control of shares in Belarusian companies.³³ In addition to these three candidates, after his immigration in 1999, Paznyak cannot count on any significant institutional support in Belarus. The Conservative-Christian Party/Belarusian Popular Front (CCP-BPF) headed by Paznyak does not have enough resources for collection of the necessary amount of signatures.

More importantly, in 2005-2006 the fact of registration of a significant number of candidates for presidency (both opposition and pro-administration) would make the declared Lukashenka's popularity rating of 75-80% look doubtful. Even if it is the case that most of the candidates provide the required amount of signatures for registration, the Central Elections Committee will be ordered to declare, at official registration, that there should be no more than four candidates including the incumbent. It is almost certain that Lukashenka and, together with his “satellite”, Gaidukevich will be registered.

On December 17, the day after the election date was declared, democratic structures received information about Kazulin's attempts to drag regional structures and activists from organizations supporting Milinkevich to his side. So far these attempts have been unsuccessful. Although the number of his initiative group suggests that the social-democratic structures are still alive, the actual signature collection will say more about whether he has been able to mobilize the former Statkevich-led social democrats or whether Kazulin possesses any sort of domestic support.

³⁰ According to the public opinion questionnaires, carried out by IISEPS in September, 2005, in case Lukashenka competes with a democratic opposition candidate, the current president will gain 47,5% of votes, 25,5% of Belarussian voters will choose a democratic candidate, 12,8% will vote against every candidate, and 13,7% find it hard to decide

³¹ A nomination group has to collect no fewer than 100,000 voter signatures from 29 December to 27 January in order to place its candidate on the ballot.

³² Alexander Voitovich, terminating his presidential campaign on January 9, 2006 after the election commission did not include independent candidates' representatives.

³³ Skrebets represented the interests of „Babaevskij“ Concern in the issue of buying the control package of shares of „Kommunarka“, the biggest confectionary factory in Belarus. Lukashenka personally banned selling of „Kommunarka“. There are public concerns about the perspectives of selling „Kommunarka“, and public fear that prices for the confectionary go up in case Russian private sector get hold of Belarus biggest confectionary factory

Lukashenka is interested in a clear demonstration of free and fair competitive elections. Therefore it is easy to imagine that 2-3 alternative candidates will participate in the elections. At the same time the regime will use any (and all) administrative resource to prevent alternative candidates from real participation in the presidential race. If Kazulin gains registration he will compete for the votes of the pro-democratic electorate with Milinkevich. Lukashenka is not interested in how many votes his opponents could get, but is determined to declare that around 75-80% of voters have supported him in the first round, and to maintain control over the situation using a minimum of resource. If there are two democratic politicians in opposition to the regime (and focusing on each other), this could cause further difficulties for the organization of mass protest against electoral fraud. Indeed the former rector of the Belarusian State University has spoken of splitting the 5+ Coalition, and with the lack of popular support for opposition politicians, and proposes himself as a new opposition politician.

One should keep in mind that presenting a split of the opposition is an essential part of Lukashenka's plan to fix relations with the West without taking a single step towards the democratization of Belarus.